



Put a plug in the summer brain drain

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(CNN) -- Though they may have left their textbooks behind when school ended, kids at Harlem RBI, a youth development program in East Harlem, New York, have no plans to leave behind what they have learned over the past nine months.

During the summer months, Harlem RBI combines an intensive reading and literacy program with baseball and softball. Kids are in teams both in the classroom and on the field. They are learning teamwork and academic skills, and they are scoring runs by reading books and engaging in intensive literacy instruction.

This is just one example of ways that communities across the country are trying to combat a phenomenon called "summer learning loss." This loss of learning over the summer can mean an academic setback for some children that will take weeks, and in some cases months, to remedy in the fall.

"One hundred years of research confirms that all young people are at risk of losing ground academically over the summer months," says Ron Fairchild, Executive Director of the Center for Summer Learning at Johns Hopkins University in Maryland.

According to Dr. Harris Cooper, Professor of Psychology at Duke University and the director of the program in education, test scores were, on average, at least one month lower when students returned to school in the fall than when they left in the spring.

In other words, students who may have finished third grade at a 3.9 level (3rd grade, ninth month), returned to school in the fall, on average, at a 3.8 level.

"The areas that kids most forget are the things that they learn through repetition and practice, such as spelling words and math computation," says Cooper.

Research points to the fact that all young people are at risk of losing more than two months in math computation skills, regardless of where they are in the socioeconomic spectrum.

However, when it comes to reading skills, lower income students are more negatively affected during the summer.

According to Fairchild, "While middle and upper income students typically do not lose reading skills, and in some cases may experience a slight gain in reading performance over the summer, lower income kids typically experience a setback of over two months."

Though there have been few studies to show the cumulative effect of those learning losses during elementary school, experts fear that without quality summer programming, a growth in the achievement gap between lower and upper income students will accelerate significantly.

"By the time that kids reach fifth grade," says Fairchild, "on average, low income kids are close to two years behind their higher income peers in reading performance as a result of their experiencing summer learning loss."

And with teachers spending between two and six weeks at the beginning of each school year re-teaching material that students have forgotten over the summer, the ramifications of summer learning loss might affect all students.

Why the learning loss?

One of the reasons for the losses in reading and math skills over the summer may have to do with how embedded the practice of these skills are in the child's environment.

"Parents who know the importance of reading will make sure that their kids read over the summer -- and it is not unusual for kids to find things to read," says Cooper. "Math is less naturally embedded in children's environment, so they are more likely to forget math skills over the summer."

While such learning losses have caused some to question the fragility of the information that students are learning throughout the school year, Fairchild offers a different explanation for the learning loss.

"If professional athletes or musicians took a three-month break from any type of training or practice, you would expect them to come back to their sport or to their orchestra experiencing a lag in their performance, and it would take a while to get back into performance shape."

And while many parents lament the loss of the lazy days of summer, experts emphasize that learning doesn't stop just because the school year ends.

"Forgetting things is something that all humans do," Cooper says. "Kids have active minds and they are learning all the time. So it doesn't make much sense to ignore what they are being exposed to for three months of the year."

Summer learning can be fun

Does the threat of losing ground over the summer mean the end of summertime fun?

Not according to experts in the field of summer learning loss. "High quality summer programs can close achievement gaps and make sure that kids can go back to schools in the fall ready to learn," explains Fairchild.

For students who have an academic weakness, summer can be a perfect time to address it. But as school districts across the country reinvent the concept of summer school, more and more children are attending summer enrichment programs that combine a real focus on academics with a fun-filled recreational experience.

Building Educated Leaders for Life (BELL) is a nonprofit group that runs full-day academic enrichment programs targeted at low income populations and communities where kids are most at risk for experiencing summer learning loss. The organization provides kids academic instruction, educational, cultural, artistic and recreational activities, guest speakers, community service and field trips.

In addition to enrolling children in organized summer programs, parents can also turn to at-home materials such as the *Summer Bridge Activities* workbook series, created by Michele Van Leeuwen, a mother of three.

The workbooks provide daily activities in reading, writing, arithmetic and language arts, and they offer parents suggestions for how to motivate their children to engage in the academic exercises. Van Leeuwen recommends that parents use the summer to gauge their children's strengths and weaknesses.

"Many times as parents, we don't know where our children's challenges are. By going through the *Summer Bridge Activities*, parents can identify what their children know and don't know."

While there are many summer learning materials available to parents, Cooper stresses, "Variety is the spice of life. Academic-related activities shouldn't last all day, every day and neither should down time. Kids are learning all the time, even during summer, no matter what they're doing."